

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 495

CE 077 020

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TITLE Vocational Education's Image for the 21st Century. ERIC Digest No. 188.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, OH.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CE-98-188
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT RR93002001
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, College of Education, The Ohio State University, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Change; *Community Attitudes; *Educational Attitudes; *Marketing; Postsecondary Education; Public Opinion; *Public Relations; Secondary Education; Strategic Planning; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Marketing; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Because of its pervasive "image problem," vocational education (VE) is not being given high priority by leaders of the new vocational education school reform movement and it is being forced to compete against others in the arena of education for a shrinking student population and scarce resources. Like other service industries, VE has much to gain from capitalizing on the benefits of a comprehensive marketing approach. For a number of years, marketing professionals have urged vocational educators to get serious about image building. Among their suggestions for marketing VE are the following: work to position VE as the leader in occupational training; develop a very aggressive marketing campaign with major messages that change present perceptions; emphasize VE's role as a viable alternative that can in fact lead to completion of an undergraduate degree; replace occasional bursts of marketing with strategic marketing planning conducted on a regular, long-term basis; and keep strategic marketing plans fluid. Marketing has a major role to play in developing a positive response to VE. Regardless of the level or specific VE institution involved, the basic marketing approach remains the same: it requires an internal marketing effort, strategic plan, and fully committed administration. (Contains 12 references) (MN)

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CE 077020

Vocational Education's Image for the 21st Century

These are hard times for secondary vocational education. Leaders of the new school reform movement do not give it high priority. They assume that it is separate from general education, has little educational value, and should be replaced by a predominantly academic curriculum. At best vocational courses are expected to provide students who are not college bound with minimal training for low-status jobs at entry level (Silberman 1986). Ask a vocational educator to name the most serious issues facing the field today, and most will rank "our image problem" high on the list ("What Do People Think of Us?" 1997, p. 14)

The "image problem" has been pervasive over the past 10 years as evidenced by three journal issues from the American Vocational Association (AVA) dedicated to this topic—November-December 1987, January 1993, and September 1997. Reviewing the context of the problem over a 10-year period, the same messages resurface:

- A good image begins with good programs that meet the needs of students, employers, and the community.
- Vocational education continues to compete against others in the arena of education for a shrinking student population and scarce resources.
- Vocational education is mostly for high school kids who don't plan to go to college.
- Groups that benefit most from vocational education include students not going to college, adults who need job skills, and students with disabilities.
- Generally, adults and youth have heard of vocational education, but they have no clear idea of what it is.

For many the word "vocational" doesn't work. A trend noted by AVA's *Techniques* has been accelerating since 1992. Five years ago, the magazine noted that at least 15 states had changed the name of their vocational education system within the previous 3 years and that in many more instances school districts had changed the names of vocational centers or programs. The reasons varied, but the one most often cited was public image: negative baggage associated with the word "vocational" (Ries 1997).

This *ERIC Digest* gives a brief overview of strategic marketing and how it can build a stronger image for vocational education.

Let's Get Serious about Image Building

In recent years, industries such as health care, finance, and law have been aggressively marketing their services. This departure from tradition is a response to sweeping changes in technology, demographics, and new customer demands. Vocational education, like other service industries, must respond to such change. Vocational education has much to gain from capitalizing on the benefits of a comprehensive marketing approach. For a number of years, marketing professionals have urged vocational educators to get serious about image building. Some of their more pertinent advice follows.

Shields (1989) feels that vocational education can weather the assaults on its contributions to school by aggressively marketing itself. He offers these steps for marketing vocational education:

1. Identify internal (teachers, counselors, students, school board members) and external (parents, taxpayers, civic groups, and professional organizations) markets you want to "sell" on vocational education.
2. Build your network and tap into it. Assign each staff person the responsibility for maintaining contact with one or more organizations.
3. Target areas that need improvement or misconceptions that require explanation.
4. Set your goals. These might include to provide information concerning the nature of vocational programs; to clarify the philosophy, goals, and objectives of programs; to publicize program activities; and to create an awareness of program needs. Make your desired outcomes specific: to increase enrollment, for example, or to attract more females into the program.
5. Design a strategic marketing plan to meet those goals.
6. Set a timetable.
7. Outline a calendar of activities that runs throughout the school year.
8. Coordinate resources, people, activities. Put staff members in charge of specific events.
9. Follow up. Meet regularly as a way of monitoring your progress and keeping the momentum.
10. Evaluate the results.

In their research on schools that have high public confidence, Achilles et al. (1989) note that marketing is the most pervasive mode of building high confidence. Their research also notes that current school and community relations/public relations practices emphasize a passive, school-oriented communications mode or primarily cognitive approaches, and they rely less on marketing. The result is that confidence in public schools was relatively low in the 1970s and 1980s.

Francis T. Tuttle (1987), past president of AVA, states: "We must have strategic plans at every level to improve the image of vocational education" (p. 11). According to Charles H. Buzzell (1987, past executive director of AVA), the "surest formula for improving image, the experts say is to 1. Do a good job; 2. Do a good job; 3. Do a good job; and 4. Tell people about it" (p. 10).

Brodhead (1991) indicates that vocational educators must tell the world about what we are doing—and be prepared to spend some money to do it. He goes as far as to recommend that schools lacking resources to accomplish this goal should solicit resources from business and industry. He tells schools to "create a vision, build a plan, take it to them and show them how it's in their best interests to fund it. Our product is their lifeblood" (p. 25).

Sharpe (1993) emphasizes that image begins at home. "Image of any service organization is in the hands of its providers. This is especially true for vocational-technical education, whose providers (instructors and staff) are in daily contact with their primary customers (students) for months and even years." (p. 24). Quantity of contact and quality of influence place vocational education in the driver seat for tremendous control over image. Sharpe recommends that teachers and administrators consider these all-important questions: What do our customers think of us? How well do we perform our services? The answers are found in the image of the program or school.

"Neither advertising nor any external influence completely shapes your impressions of an organization. The strongest impressions come from personal experiences. The marketing implications are obvious. 'Word-of-mouth' advertising is the second most powerful form of marketing, after personal experience" (Sharpe 1993, p. 24). An "upbeat, enthusiastic attitude demonstrated on the front line is what sells companies on the vocational education student product" (ibid.).

Suggestions for Image Building

After years of working on marketing principles and problems, Ries and Trout's (1993) have distilled their findings into 22 immutable laws of marketing that they feel govern success and failure in the marketplace. Insight for marketing vocational education can be drawn from several of these laws.

The Law of Leadership—It's better to be first than it is to be better. The basic issue in marketing is to create a category you can be first in (p. 2).

Marketing practice for vocational education: Clearly, vocational education has the enviable position of being the first type of occupational training consistently offered throughout the United States. Critical to marketing efforts is the need to position vocational education as the LEADER in occupational training as the customers' FIRST choice.

The Law of Perception—Marketing is not a battle of products. It is a battle of perception (p. 18).

Marketing practice for vocational education: If marketing is a battle of perception, not product, then mind takes precedence over the marketplace (e.g., vocational education vs. higher education). A perception that exists in the mind is often interpreted as a universal truth. People are seldom, if ever, wrong, at least in their own minds. Ries and Trout put it this way:

If you want to make a big impression on another person, you cannot worm your way into their minds and then slowly build up a favorable opinion over a period of time. The mind doesn't work that way. You have to BLAST your way into the mind. The reason you BLAST instead of worm is people don't like to change their minds. Once they perceive you one way, that's it. (ibid.)

Marketing practice for vocational education: To change present "image/perception" requires a very aggressive marketing campaign with major messages that change present perceptions. National, state, and local marketing efforts must identify what perceptions of vocational education are formed in the mind if we ever want to change customers' minds.

The Law of the Ladder—The marketing strategy to use depends on which rung you occupy on the ladder (p. 38).

Marketing practice for vocational education: Although being first in the customer's mind ought to be our primary marketing objective, the battle isn't lost if we decide that a "college education" is first and vocational education wants to position itself as second on the "product" ladder. This would require that vocational education acknowledge higher education as the first "training" alternative and offer vocational education as a viable alternative. The mind is selective. Customers use their "ladders" in deciding which information to accept and which information to reject. In general, a mind accepts only new data that are consistent with its product ladder in that category. Everything else is ignored. Vocational education may need to posture its marketing approach that college is an excellent choice for further training BUT vocational education is a viable alternative and can in fact lead to completion of an undergraduate degree.

The Law of Perspective—Marketing effects take place over an extended period of time (p. 62).

Marketing practice for vocational education: Vocational education cannot afford to ignore the marketing function any longer. Occasional bursts of marketing efforts do not sustain a long-term positive image with customers. Strategic marketing planning must be done on a regular, long-term basis.

The Law of Unpredictability—Unless you write your competitors' plans, you can't predict the future (p. 98).

Marketing practice for vocational education: Strategic marketing plans must be fluid. Marketing plans that make assumptions about the future are usually wrong. Good short-term planning is coming up with an angle or word that differentiates vocational education. Then set up a coherent long-term marketing direction that builds a program to maximize that idea or angle. It's not a long-term plan; it's a long-term direction.

Conclusion

As vocational education moves into the 21st century, the marketing process (Banach et al. 1996) will—

- accommodate the forces of radical change;
- create a responsive, future-focused organization; and
- allow for a "chosen image" instead of a perceived image.

Marketing has a major role to play in developing a positive response to vocational education. O'Connor and Trussell (1987) point out that, regardless of the level or the specific institution, the basic marketing approach is the same. It requires an internal marketing effort, a strategic plan, and a fully committed administration. Marketing cannot be an "add-on" activity. Rather, it must be interwoven into the fabric of the institution.

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